Secret self-harmer

Question

I have a friend who self-harms. She refuses to see professionals point-blank, and only talks to me about it. Last night she told me she cut too deep and nearly killed herself.

I feel guilty at not telling anyone else but she asked me not to. I’m scared she will go too far and kill herself. She also tells me her dad beats her and tells her he wishes she’d never been born. What should I do?

Answer

It sounds like you care very deeply for your friend and are trying to be as supportive as you can. This is a lot to take on by yourself, especially when she is refusing to talk to anyone else or seek professional help. It must be upsetting for you, seeing the way in which her dad’s abusive behaviour and her self-harming are having such a negative impact on her mental wellbeing.

Self-harm is often a way for people to cope with and get through difficult emotions or situations. These feelings are quite often the reason why people self harm, as it can be a means of communicating what they cannot put into words or even into thoughts. It may also be a way of releasing painful emotions such as rage, sadness, emptiness, guilt or fear. Since it’s generally a private coping mechanism rather than attention seeking, some people feel ashamed and unable to admit to anyone what they are doing. It is important to remember though, people who self-harm are not usually trying to commit suicide. But it is understandable you feel concerned about this, especially as she told you she cut herself so deeply recently.

It is positive to hear she feels comfortable talking to you about it, and it’s a good idea to find out some practical information on how to support people who self-harm.

Remember that by being her friend and giving her your time and attention, you are letting her know that you are there for her. However, fearing she might go to the extreme of killing herself must be putting a lot of pressure on you. This situation is evidently very worrying for you and you sound like you feel responsible for her welfare, but there are organisations available to you, and your friend, that can offer confidential advice and support.

You might like to consider encouraging your friend to visit the National Self Harm Network website, an organisation providing support to people who self harm. Their website features a range of resources and also includes a message board where she can talk to people who have been through similar experiences without having to verbally acknowledge her problems. There is also The Bristol Crisis Centre for Women who have a national self harm helpline for women that your friend may find helpful. She can call them on 0117 925 1119. Both organisations provide support to friends and family of people who are self harming, so you might benefit from contacting them too.
Although your friend is currently refusing to do this, it might be worth emphasising how much a visit to her doctor (GP) could help. Perhaps by talking through why she's so worried about seeing a GP she might consider trying this? Maybe you could offer to go with her as a means of support.

There may be certain underlying issues surrounding your friend’s behaviour, such as anxiety or depression. You could also suggest that she thinks about trying a talking therapy, such as counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to help her identify what might be contributing to her self-harming behaviour. Her GP should also be able to refer her onto an appropriate counselling service or she could try contacting Youth Access if she wished to seek this form of support independently.

Finally, you or your friend may like to keep in mind the option of talking in confidence to SANELINE on 0845 767 8000. You would both be able to talk through the feelings and worries you have.